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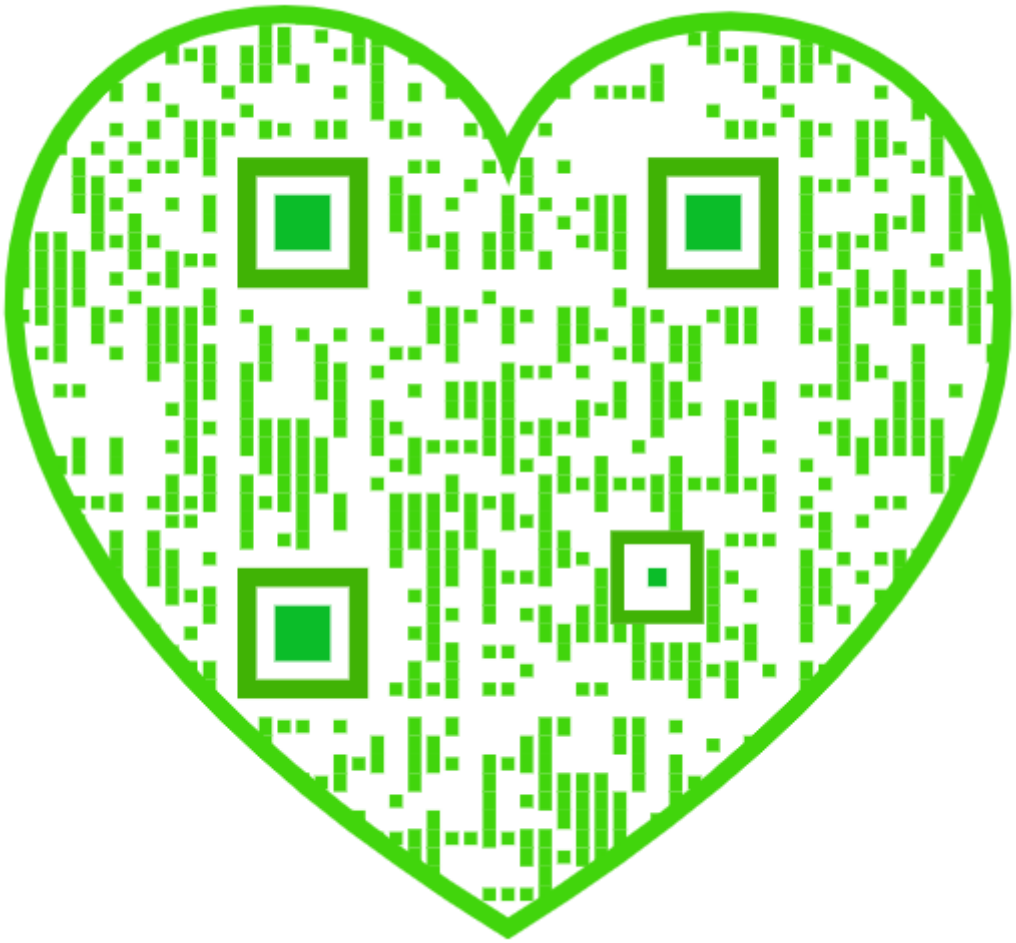

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
U. S. BUREAU OF EDUCATION.

INSTRUCTION

IN

MORALS AND CIVIL GOVERNMENT.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
BUREAU OF EDUCATION,
Washington, July, 1882.

The importance of training in morality as a feature of the public school teacher's work has engaged the attention of most writers on educational topics and has been frequently adverted to in the different publications of this Office. The scope and character of the instruction in citizenship which our public schools may reasonably be expected to impart were wisely considered, and the need of such instruction warmly urged, in the valuable paper of Mr. Justice Strong that was read before the Department of Superintendence at a recent meeting and printed in Circular of Information No. 2, 1879. The circular which A. Vessiot, the academic inspector of schools at Marseilles, France, recently addressed to the teachers of his district respecting moral and civil instruction, seems to me to contain such valuable suggestions as to the nature of the instruction that may properly be given under this head and such useful hints as to the manner in which it ought to be conveyed that I have caused it to be translated, in the hope that it may prove of service in this country.

JOHN EATON,
Commissioner.

WASHINGTON:
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MORAL AND CIVIL INSTRUCTION.

We advise our teachers to assign hereafter a large place in their work to instruction in morals and civil government.

Moral and civil instruction meets the wants as well as the wishes of the country; it is a necessary consequence of the profound change which is taking place in our institutions, in our laws, in our manners. The establishment of the republic and of universal suffrage, which is its basis, has given to the school a new character; it imposes upon the teacher new duties. The primary school is no longer merely local, communal; it has become in the highest degree a national institution, on which even the entire future of the country depends. It is no longer a place to which the child resorts to acquire certain information that may prove useful to him in private life; it is the source from which is to be drawn, together with the principles of universal morality, a knowledge of his rights and duties in regard to public life; it is the school of citizenship and patriotism.

The function, then, of the teacher is notably increased, and his responsibility extended. The teacher used to drill his pupils in reading, writing, and arithmetic; now, without neglecting that portion of his duty, he ought to have a higher ambition, namely, that of raising up for the country defenders and for the republic citizens.

The children now under his care will one day be voters and soldiers; they will have their share of influence in shaping the future of the country; their souls must then be well tempered, their minds must be enlightened; they must be acquainted with the intelligence of their times, with the society of which they are to become members, the civil duties they will have to fulfil, the institutions they will have to strengthen. They must be inspired with a generous patriotism; this does not mean that they are to be taught to hate foreign peoples — let us leave that cruel instruction to others — but that they are to nourish a passionate love of their own country. True patriotism consists in love, and not hate; it does not consist in any attempted systematic alteration of well established historical facts or jealous depreciation of the greatness and glories of other peoples. No, it does not involve the humiliation of others; it is inspired by justice, it is allied to a noble emulation. This it is that France needs, and this is what French youth should be taught.

Undoubtedly this double instruction is not entirely new, and it would be erroneous to suppose that moral and civil instruction now first makes its sudden appearance in our schools. Many of our teachers are now, and long have been, giving lessons calculated to make their pupils worthy people and good citizens. In fact, all instruction, the humblest and that the furthest removed from morality properly so called, has nevertheless a certain improving influence, and every virtuous person by the mere fact of frequent intercourse communicates to others, and especially to children, something of his own moral elevation. But what has heretofore been in some degree the involuntary effect of the instruction itself and of the morality of the teachers — personal in its inspiration and consequently unequal and intermittent — will now be due to a common and sustained effort towards a clearly defined object, to a general and persistent endeavor, in a word, to a branch of instruction. What shall be its character? What its form? * * *

The teacher must grapple with the problem how to render lucid and pleasing those truths which flow from the very nature of man and the existence of society, and to induce children to make them the rules of their conduct. What is needed is that there should be awakened, developed, fortified in them those sentiments which give dignity to man, honor to families, and power to states.

Moral and civil instruction ought not then to be confined to one division or subdivision of the scholastic programme, restricted to one class or to a prescribed hour,

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pressed in the narrow mould of a few inert formulas or solemn maxims; it ought to permeate all parts of the work of instruction, blossoming out in varied developments and reappearing every day and every hour; it ought to be the life, the soul, of the school. It is in the school that a child should draw in morality and patriotism as he inspires air, without noticing it; for to teach morality successfully there is no call for too much moralizing. That moral lesson which is announced risks being lost. Moral instruction should be combined with everything, but insensibly, like those nutritive elements which the scientist finds reappearing in all sorts of food, but which are concealed under the infinite variety of color and form in which nature clothes animals and plants, and which man unwittingly assimilates without a suspicion. Thus moral instruction will enter into the various work of the class, the readings, recitations, dictations, the stories related by the teacher, the selections drawn from the poets and romancers, the familiar and sprightly conversations, the grave reflections on history, the games, the promenades — being everywhere present, in short, without making its presence remarked.

Does it follow that theory should be absolutely banished from the school? No, but it should have only the smallest place. It will suffice if once a week, and preferably at its close, the teacher expresses the substance of the last lessons he has reviewed and puts it into didactic form.

As far as practicable, it is the child himself who ought to draw the rules and moral laws from the facts which contain them, as the fruit contains the seed; and this is not so difficult as it appears. A reading finished, a story related, the teacher by means of questions invites the judgment of the child on the actions of this or that character who has figured in the recital; rarely does the child err as to the moral value of the actions submitted to his consideration. The teacher then asks the child if he would pronounce a similar judgment on all men who should act in the same way, and thus leads him to generalize his decision, that is, to formulate a principle, a rule. The child thus becomes his own legislator; he has himself discovered the law; having made it he understands it, and he obeys it more willingly because it has imposed itself upon his reason instead of being imposed upon his will. It does not seem needful to us to mark out for teachers a programme of moral instruction; such programmes are to be had in abundance; but we prefer to leave with them the responsibility of incorporating this instruction with their other work as they deem proper. The weekly report, however, should contain a résumé of what has been done. These résumés themselves, collected for a period of several months, will gradually form a real course in moral instruction which the teacher, in the light of his experience, can extend or limit as he desires.

But our teachers should not forget that the work of giving moral instruction imposes upon them a moral obligation to make their conduct accord with their instruction. Of all lessons the best is the living lesson, the example of the teacher himself. Like teacher, like pupils. Children have a wonderful shrewdness in detecting inconsistencies between the conduct of the teacher and his counsels. The efficacy of this instruction is to be measured by the moral value of those who give it; and from this point of view we are confident that moral instruction will exert a beneficial influence on the teachers themselves and that they will profit by their own lessons.

As to instruction in civil government properly so called, aside from the sentiments which it is its mission to encourage and disseminate, it ought to afford the child an image of society, to present to his eyes the different parts of a vast and rich whole; in this there is the material needed for methodical training, and, consequently, for a programme in which its limits are indicated and its work laid out.

We confidently intrust this double instruction to the enlightened zeal of the primary inspectors, to the tried patriotism of our teachers. We trustingly ask them to make a great and generous effort to elevate national education, to worthily respond alike to the solicitude of the government and the chambers and to the ever increasing sacrifices which the country has imposed on herself; finally, we ask them to raise up for the country a generation both healthy and strong.

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